

Sunday School

PAUL'S SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY.

Acts 17:22-34.

Lesson for July 25, 1909.

GOLDEN TEXT.—"God is a Spirit; and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."—John 4:24.

DAILY HOME READINGS.

M.—Acts 17:16-34. T.—Isa. 40:9-17.
W.—Isa. 40:18-31. Th.—Jer. 10:1-16.
F.—Psalm 50:1-15. S.—John 4:19-29.
S.—2 Cor. 5:1-11.

TOPICAL OUTLINE.

Paul's Failure at Athens—

His sermon on Mars Hill, vs. 22-31.

Attended with small results, vs. 32-34.

SHORTER CATECHISM.

Q. 6.5—What is forbidden in the fifth commandment?

A. The fifth commandment forbiddeth the neglecting of, or doing anything against the honor and duty which belongeth to every one in their several places and relations.

LESSON COMMENTS.

When Paul found it necessary to leave Thessalonica, for obvious reasons, he could not go back to Philippi; so he determined to press farther west. Taking boat, he travels by way of the Thermaic Gulf to the very center of culture and art and philosophy. Although much of the glory of Athens had departed and it was now a Roman province, yet there was still gathered here the best scholars, and it was the seat of philosophy.

Coming to the Agora, he found himself in the center of the public life of the city, where met the orators and statesmen poets and artists, to converse or to transact their business.

Following his usual custom, he makes himself known to his own race and disputes in the synagogue with the Jews. We are not told with what success he met, and probably his time in Athens was so short that no Church was established.

He did not confine himself to the Jews, but also disputed in the market daily with them that met with him. This market was the Agora of which we have spoken; not a market in our sense of the term, but a public square, a place of concourse.

It was in this place that Paul spent much of his time while he waited for his companions. His mind and heart were very impressionable at this time, having been roughly treated by those whom he would befriend and having been separated from his fellow-laborers. He was alone in the great city. Now more than at any time in his life his spirit was moved when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. A great pity was in his heart that all the beauty and learning which were around him were used in the service of the devil and against the honor of the Lord Jehovah.

Speaking in a public place and of a new religion, he encountered some of the Epicureans and Stoics. The Epicureans were virtually atheists and their philosophy was a system of materialism. If they believed in the gods, it was that they were separated from the affairs of the earth. To them the universe was a great accident. There was no moral governor, no retribution. The soul, if there was one, was but finer matter and nothing without the body. In death, both soul and body were annihilated. Their moral creed was, Eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow we die. Pleasure was the end of life, and expediency was the rule of life. To such a school the doctrine of the resurrection which Paul preached was foolishness.

The Stoics were Pantheists. They said that the soul at death would be burnt or be reabsorbed into God. To them the resurrection was irrational. Their rule of life was an austere apathy and the repression of all human feeling and passion. Stoicism was the school of pride and could have no sympathy with a Saviour who was touched with the feeling of our infirmities.

Some of these, probably the Epicureans, ask lightly, "What will this babler say?" The more serious Stoics probably would give some attention to the Apostle and would weigh

his doctrine.

Moved with various feelings, they took him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine whereof thou speakest is?" A multitude of the men who spent their time in scholarly disputation and in telling or hearing something new followed. Paul, embracing the opportunity, preaches them the most remarkable sermon of his ministry. The place was one which would incline the hearers to give serious attention to what the Apostle had to say. It was here that the court of judicature met to pass sentence on the greatest criminals and to decide on the most solemn question connected with religion.

Paul, as he took his position upon the hill, was on fire with love for the souls of these men, who were enslaved by this false religion; but, with all his earnestness, he was not led to denunciation nor was he to be ensnared in any of his words. His address is remarkable for its tact and its aptness, and was calculated to arrest the attention of his hearers without inciting them to an attitude of antagonism. Instead of attacking their objects of devotion, he uses one as a text, and would draw their minds from the emptiness of their worship to that unknown God whom they worshipped, though they knew him not.

In the 22nd verse our English translation would have Paul accuse these men as being superstitious. A better translation is: "All things which I behold bear witness to your carefulness in religion;" or, "I perceive that you are much given to religious worship."

Paul everywhere shows himself to be a perfect gentleman in his address, and nowhere is guilty of rudeness or boorishness. He tells them that he had found an altar to the Unknown God, erected perhaps to commemorate some deliverance that they could ascribe to no other God, or perhaps they had heard of the God of the Jews, and not wishing to slight any divinity, had erected this altar. Paul uses the altar as his text and tells them that he came to declare that God whom they now dimly worshipped not knowing Him.

This discourse was different from those which he had spoken in the synagogues, where his listeners believed in the personal Jehovah. It was not a sermon on the Messiahship of Jesus or the prophecies relating to him. This would have been meaningless to the Athenians. His subject was the living God as opposed to the polytheism, atheism and materialism of Greece. We can not fail to notice that his method was different from that of the schools; there was nothing of speculation in it, but it was a positive declaration of the existence of the one God, who is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.

Surrounded as he was by statues and temples, we can imagine the Apostle directing the attention of the audience to each in turn and then leading them to higher thought and to a higher estimate of the honor and majesty of God than could be had in brazen statues or pillared temples. The quotation from one of their own poets, Aratus, he also used to point his argument. This was one sermon in which a quotation from a heathen poet would have more force, if rightly used, than a quotation from Isaiah, of whom the Athenians had never heard.

While he does not mention Jesus by name, no doubt the Athenians knew to whom he had reference when he spoke the words of the 31st verse. In the Agora he had been preaching Jesus and the resurrection. Not only did he now preach the resurrection of the dead, but that he had appointed a day and appointed a judge before whom they all must stand and be judged. This gained additional force upon the minds of the hearers from the place where it was uttered. This Mars Hill was where the court judged and passed sentence, and no doubt the vision of the last assize rose in the minds of many of these men.

The effect of this sermon, which was interrupted, was such as we might expect in an audience that had been gathered largely by curiosity. Some mocked; others more serious, "We will hear thee again of this matter." But certain men clave unto him and believed, among whom was Dionysius, a member of the court of Areopagus. Also a woman named Damaris, of whom we know nothing further. W. D. Hedleston.